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DEPARTMENT FOR SA, SA/INS, INR/NESA; PLS PASS TO USTR J. ROSENBAUM

NSC FOR E. MILLARD; TREASURY FOR R. ADKINS; COMMERCE FOR
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SUBJECT: Sri Lanka: President swears in new PM,
Mahinda Rajapakse; Cabinet slated to be named soon

Refs: (A) Colombo - OpsCenter 04-06-04 telecon
- (B) Colombo 587, and previous

(U) Classified by Ambassador Jeffrey J. Lunstead.
Reasons 1.5 (b,d).

1. (C) SUMMARY: On April 6, President Kumaratunga swore in Mahinda Rajapakse, a senior leader in her SLFP party, as Sri Lanka's next prime minister. A new cabinet may be sworn in the next day or so. In the meantime, the President's UPFA grouping (SLFP plus JVP) continues to look for partners in order to attain a majority in Parliament (it has until April 22, when the new Parliament first sits to prove its majority status). Mission knows Rajapakse well. He is affable and relatively moderate on peace process and economic issues. Bio-data is provided in Para 8. END SUMMARY.

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Rajapakse is new PM
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2. (C) Early April 6, President Chandrika Kumaratunga swore in Mahinda Rajapakse, a senior leader in her Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) and former Opposition Leader, as Sri Lanka's new Prime Minister. (Bio-data on Rajapakse is provided in Para 8.) The ceremony followed Sri Lanka's parliamentary election on April 2 in which the President's United People's Freedom Alliance (UPFA) won the most seats in Parliament (see Reftels). (The UPFA is an alliance of the SLFP and the Marxist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna, "JVP.") The swearing in ceremony, which was carried live on national television, was a brief one. It took place in front of a large crowd of party supporters gathered at the President's Offices in Colombo's Fort area. Before and after the ceremony, Rajapakse received the blessing of several Buddhist monks. The ceremony itself was supposed to take place at an "auspicious" time specified to be 10:10 a.m., but -- as is the case with many events involving the President -- it started over an hour late.

3. (C) Rajapakse replaces Ranil Wickremesinghe as PM. Wickremesinghe, the leader of the United National Party (UNP) which fared very poorly in the election, had been prime minister since December 2001, and is slated to become the next Opposition leader in Parliament (if his party agrees). He has now moved out of Temple Trees, the PM's official residence across from the Embassy, and Rajapakse is expected to move in shortly. (Bradman Weerakoon, Wickremesinghe's secretary and the secretary for many previous Sri Lankan leaders, is scheduled to leave his post late April 6. Weerakoon's replacement in this very important position has not been announced: we have heard that it could be Lalith Weeratunga, who served as the secretary to Ratnasiri Wickremanayake, the previous People's Alliance, "PA," PM. It is also possible that an assistant to Rajapakse could be named to the slot.)

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Cabinet to be named later
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4. (C) A new cabinet is expected to be sworn in soon, perhaps as early as late April 6 or April 7. Due to the influence of the JVP, which has vociferously complained about the large number of ministerial positions in previous governments, the UPFA cabinet should be relatively small by Sri Lankan standards, perhaps 30 or so ministers and a handful of deputy ministers. (The UNP government maintained about 70 ministerial positions and the previous PA government had almost 70-80 at times.)

5. (C) Not unexpectedly, there is reportedly a debate going on within UPFA circles as to who should receive

ministerial allotments. The JVP appears set to receive at least four ministries, although there are reports that the party is arguing for more based on its impressive showing in the election. We have been told by contacts that President Kumaratunga will retain control of the defense and internal security (formerly interior) portfolios, which she took over from the previous UNP government in November 2003. Lakshman Kadirgamar, a close adviser to the President, is rumored to be the prime candidate to take over as foreign minister. (Kadirgamar had been mentioned as a candidate to be PM, but lost out to Rajapakse. He was foreign minister in the previous PA government from 1994-2001.)

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UPFA continues to try to gain majority status
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16. (C) Even as a new PM was sworn in and a cabinet is being selected, the UPFA continues its efforts to convince smaller parties to join with it, so that it can attain the 113 seats or more necessary to form a majority in Sri Lanka's Parliament. (The UPFA won 105 seats in Parliament. It has until April 22 -- the date the new Parliament first meets -- to show it has majority support in Parliament. If it does not do so by that timeframe, a UPFA "minority" government could be subject to a vote of no confidence.) The UPFA is reported to be working with the following smaller parties in order to obtain their support:

-- The UPFA has approached the Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU) party, which ran an all-Buddhist monk candidate slate and won nine parliamentary seats. The JHU, for its part, has stated in the press that it has no plans to join in a government. Various monks affiliated with the JHU have been quoted as stating that the party is willing to extend its support on individual items of legislation on a case-by-case basis, but that it will otherwise remain neutral in Parliament.

-- Reports also indicate that the UPFA has made overtures to the tea estate Tamil Ceylon Worker's Congress (CWC), which won 6-7 seats. The CWC has traditionally liked to be on the winning side, so that its leader, A. Thondaman, can maintain control of the ministry of plantations. (This portfolio has been held by the CWC through several governments, including by Thondaman's grandfather, the CWC founder.) In recent years, Thondaman has drawn closer to the Tamil Tigers, who have long been at odds with President Kumaratunga, and it is uncertain whether that factor may influence his decision on whether or not to link up with the UPFA. There are also reports that another tea estate party, the Upcountry People's Front (UPF), has been contacted by the UPFA. (The UPF won one seat and is known to be very pro-Tamil Tiger.)

-- The UPFA has also been in touch with the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC), which secured five seats. SLMC leader Rauf Hakeem is reported to want to hold on to his position as Minister of Ports and Shipping, a post that the SLMC has controlled through the previous UNP and PA governments. Holding on to that ministry is hardly a fait accompli for Hakeem, however, as there are several Muslim MPs in the President's UPFA political grouping who broke with the SLMC earlier in the year and are known to be hostile to Hakeem. Hakeem also does not get along well with Kumaratunga. These factors may make the SLMC a bad fit for the UPFA.

-- There are also reports that the UPFA has been in touch with the 4-5 MPs from the Tamil National Alliance (TNA) party who are reportedly aligned with eastern rebel leader Karuna. (The TNA won a total 22 seats in the election.) The TNA, which ran in the April 2 election as the "Ilanki Tamil Arasu Katchchi" (ITAK - "Federal Party"), is reportedly holding a meeting late April 6 to discuss its posture regarding the upcoming Parliament. A link-up with the UPFA by pro-Karuna MP's would no doubt enrage LTTE leader Prabhakaran.

-- The anti-Tamil Tiger Eelam People's Democratic Party (EPDP) has already declared its support for the UPFA. The EPDP won one seat in the election.

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COMMENT
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17. (C) Mission knows Rajapakse well and he has met with many high-level USG visitors to Sri Lanka. He is affable and easy to approach, and seemingly moderate on peace process and economic issues. He also appears relatively receptive to U.S. views. That said, he is likely to be overshadowed by President Kumaratunga, who

has a dominating personality (to put it mildly) and controls most of the key levers of power as president to boot. There is little doubt that she will make virtually all of the key peace process and economic decisions. (Rajapakse knows his place in the hierarchy: when asked by a journalist before his swearing-in ceremony today about his responsibilities in office, he replied straightforwardly enough, "the President will handle the peace process.") Rajapakse is likely to get in his views, but only edgewise. He also told the press today that he wants to see India more involved in the peace process. It's not clear exactly what he means.
END COMMENT.

18. Bio-Data on new Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse follows:

-- Rajapakse, 58, who was sworn in as prime minister on April 6, was the Leader of the Opposition in the Sri Lankan Parliament from 2002-2004. In a political career spanning over three decades, he was a Member of Parliament from 1970-77 and from 1989 until the present. He has served previously as minister of fisheries. He is currently Senior Vice President of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), the leading constituent element of President Kumaratunga's People's Alliance (PA) grouping. In March 2002, President Kumaratunga appointed him Opposition Leader. Since that appointment, Rajapakse has been involved in a rivalry with Anura Bandaranaike, a senior SLFP MP and the president's brother. Along with Bandaranaike, Rajapakse has been hinting that he should be the next SLFP presidential candidate in elections expected in 2005-2006. Rajapakse hails from Hambantota District in Sri Lanka's deep south. His father, D.A. Rajapakse, who died in 1967, was a longtime SLFP MP and a minister. Rajapakse is a lawyer by training. He was an IVP participant in 1989. A Sinhalese Buddhist, he is married and has three sons.

End Bio-data.

19. (U) Minimize considered.

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